

Woods Family – Some Memories

The following information has been collated by Shirley Stevens (née Martyn), daughter of Anne Jane Walker née Woods, granddaughter of John James and Elizabeth (née Maxwell) Woods, in 2004. To use Shirley's own words, it is a random collection of fond memories, humorous anecdotes woven around a few hard facts and much family lore. Shirley tells her story as follows.

These are my memories of a happy childhood, growing up in Fairfield, as a member of the large, close knit family of John James and Elizabeth Woods.

There is a mystery about the registration of Pop's birth. John James Woods was born on the 5th April 1877 at Garrison, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. His father was Thomas Woods, a farmer, and his mother was Anne Jane née Walker. The entry in the Register of Births shows that the birth of J. J. Woods was registered in the District of Deniliquin, in the Superintendent Registrar's District of Castlederg in the County of Tyrone on the 26th April 1877. Castlederg is about 50 km from Garrison as the crow flies. By road, however, it is closer to 70 km. The shortest route from Garrison to Castlederg is north-west keeping Lough Melvin to the right, then north-east via Puttigo, keeping Lower Lough Erne on the right. In 1877 the mode of transport for Anne and the infant John James would have been by horse-drawn vehicle over rough-surfaced roads. At a time when travelling more than a few miles was considered unusual, we wonder what caused Thomas and Anne to make that lengthy journey to register the birth of John James.

Nana, Elizabeth Maxwell, was born on 24th August 1872 at Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. Her father was David and her mother Jane. All her sisters emigrated to Australia; her brother Thomas went to England. Thomas's daughter was our Auntie Edie Gee. We all should remember the lovely visits to the chook farm at Pennant Hills, not to mention the lovely afternoon teas provided by Auntie Edie. Nana was the last to leave Northern Island. On arrival here (Sydney), I understand she went into service at Bishopscourt.

Our dear grandfather, known to all of us as Pop, arrived here after what was probably an interesting journey. He had been given some food for the trip, including butter, which went rancid going through the Suez Canal, so his bag was thrown overboard. He was apparently sleeping on deck, and during a storm his boots were washed overboard. He arrived in Sydney with no luggage or boots, but luck smiled on him because he was taken home by Dr Fiaschi, the father of the Dr Fiaschi in whose memory the bronze boar stands outside Sydney Hospital. Pop became yardman and driver for Dr Fiaschi Senior at Pymble.

Nana's sister Margaret, known as Auntie Maggie, and her husband, Arthur Shepherd, were running a hotel somewhere near Central Railway Station. Nana, apparently, on her day off, would visit Auntie Maggie, and that was where she and Pop met. The marriage took place at St John's Darlinghurst, on 4th April 1901, and the minister, H. M. Trickett, came from All Saints Nowra. Nana's sister Isabella (Auntie Bella) was married to Wesley Binks, who farmed in the Berry district. The Binks house is still standing in 2004 and is lovingly looked after by Mrs Margaret Binks.

Auntie Jane, known as Jinny, also lived in the Shoalhaven at Cambewarra. Her married name was Camps. These two sisters must have been instrumental in the choice of minister for the Woods–Maxwell marriage ceremony.

Nana and Pop had their first house at Liverpool, where the first two girls, Violet and Anne, were born. Pop operated his carrying business from there into Darling Harbour. One story I was told said he used to take two days to do the return nip, sleeping under the cart overnight.

Another of Pop's ventures was the silent cinema on The Crescent, Fairfield. Apparently most of the girls had their jobs. Auntie Eva played the piano, somebody played a violin, someone else was in the ticket box and another at the door. I wish I'd been there. The older girls used to go by horse and sulky to Elizabeth Farm House for piano lessons, my mother Anne included.

[Nana had a number of expressions. Two that remain in use among her descendants are "You need to get outside and shake yourself up, child dear" and "to go for a dander", a dialect Irish word meaning a stroll.]

Just picking out memories in my head, Nana had a poisoned finger and I can see her now, dipping her

finger in and out of a saucepan of boiling water on the old electric stove. Always football-sized scones and patty cakes; mustn't forget the damper. The Sunday school picnics at Latty's, transported by Pop's trucks. Pop's beautiful rose garden – there always seemed to be a bowl full of perfumed roses on the big table in the back room. (Nana used to listen for the baker's cart and trot out with a pan and trowel to pick up the horse manure.) Nana's plum trees, loaded with fruit, turned into jam and bottled in Fowler's vacuum jars. The jams were rather sharp and made your teeth curl. I remember Judy leaving the table and coming back wearing her overcoat. "It's the plums!" she cried. Auntie Eva and her girls were living with Nana and Pop after the tragic death of Uncle Tom following an appendix operation.

Pop had, at different times, guard dogs to look after the trucks. One I remember was called Harold, and one used to go cross-eyed with fury if anyone came within reach of the trucks, whether inside or outside the yard.

During the Second World War, power blackouts used to occur, so Pop bought a 240 volt alternator, which was set up in the garage. One morning it wouldn't start straight away, so he gave the belt one tug too many, which cut off the top of one finger. The weather was so bitterly cold he was in a great deal of pain. Auntie Lil knitted him some finger stalls which helped him. The winter seasons at that time were much colder than now – heavy frosts and frozen water in the pipes.

Pop built the garage the alternator was housed in. Uncle Billy said to him one day, "That beam's not level." Pop replied by putting a glass of water on the beam and said, "There, what's wrong with that?" The reply from Uncle Bill was, "Nothing – if you want to drink it."

I don't ever remember either Nana or Pop losing their tempers.

[Pop was a pragmatist. Once he painted the interior of the outside toilet, and didn't bother to remove three snails that had set up camp. The next day the snails had moved on, leaving three unpainted holes behind.]

A time of great sadness was when Auntie Eva's husband, Tom Jackson, died after an appendix operation. Pop went with one of his trucks to Bexley and brought Auntie Eva and Judy, aged 3, with their possessions back to Fairfield, where they lived on the closed-in side verandah. Rosemary was born the following April. It was a time of great sadness. Dear Bluey Moore was in the background for a long time before he and Auntie Eva were married and built their home in Camden Street. Everybody loved Blue.

Getting back to the Woods's home in York Street, there was a fig tree outside on the Frederick Street side. The starlings made a real nuisance of themselves, so Pop devised a noise-maker out of a 4-gallon kerosene tin with a large bolt attached to a length of fencing wire. A hole was punched through the wall, the wire was brought through, and a pull of the wire – wallop! – and away would go the starlings. But they always came back. The tree disappeared while Pop and Nana were away on a trip "home" to Ireland.

[Pop had always celebrated his birthday on 26th April, but when he and Nana applied for passports for their trip to Ireland, the registered copy of his birth certificate said he was born on 5th April. Instead of switching dates, he always celebrated both birthdays each year.]

Pop's love, after Nana and their family, was cars. I remember a large green touring car – I think it was an Oldsmobile – with dicky seats that folded out from the backrests of the front bench seat. No glass windows, simply canvas and celluloid panels, which clipped on to the car's doors and roof frame. There were also a Vanguard with a chrome-plated glove box door, and a 2-seater Citroën, I think. One day Uncle Max was driving Auntie Vi to Fairfield shops. She was a rather nervous passenger and was giving him instructions, when he pulled the steering wheel out of the column and said, "Here, drive the bloody thing yourself."

Some years later, Pop and Nana went in their then current car, a Silver Jubilee Buick, to Bangalow to visit Auntie Bella and Uncle Wesley Binks. While there Nana had a fall from the verandah, and broke her hip. She was admitted to hospital, and after 5 months of no treatment, Pop had Nana discharged. He set up the camping body in the Buick, strapped Nana on to a stretcher, and with Auntie Louie for company, set off to drive home to Fairfield – non-stop (about 800 km). At some stage, I suppose due to tiredness, he went off the road and down an incline. Amazingly no one was hurt. A passing motorist (and there weren't

many about) came to their aid, towed the Buick up the slope and back on to the road. The car wasn't damaged enough to stop him, so they set off again and eventually arrived at York Street. By this time he was so stiff (he had driven without any backrest because the camping body was in place) he had to be lifted from the car. Nana was admitted to Fairfield Hospital, where her hip was repaired. They were a tough pair, and loved each other dearly. For the remainder of her life, Nana walked with a small limp, as by the time of her surgery the hip joint had dissolved somewhat.

Another of Pop's passions was the Loyal Orange Lodge. One of my hobbies was knitting and I went through a phase of Fair Isle. Pop asked me to knit one for him, "But NO green!" I did knit one for him. He used to leave Nana with us at Guildford on his way to Lodge, and he arrived one cold night with the Fair Isle under his black dinner jacket.

Nana always wore blue or navy blue dresses with long sleeves, and to keep her warm in the winter Auntie Lil knitted her 3-ply navy blue petticoats. Nana by the way knitted grey socks for Pop, on 4 steel needles. She used to walk around with the ball of wool tucked under one arm.

I'd love my own children and grandchildren to have had the opportunity of knowing and living with Pop and Nana.

All the Woods girls were "handy with the needle", and as children during the Depression years we were all dressed in "hand-me-down" garments, sometimes unpicked and remade on the other side. Nothing was ever wasted. I can remember my mother unpicking a navy blue serge school tunic which had become shiny, and making it up again on the "wrong" side.

Each year when the Martyn family went to the camp site at Narrabeen, Nana and Pop would come down for the day, with a tea towel full of damper and a jar of Nana's plum jam.

[Scanned, corrected and supplemented by Matthew Stevens, son of Shirley, 7 February 2019]